

10/20/21 Wednesday

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Hundreds of Netflix Employees Walk Out in Trans Rights Protest Amid Continued Chappelle Fallout

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Several hundred Netflix employees walked out of their offices in protest on Wednesday over the media company's handling of complaints about a Dave Chappelle comedy special critics said denigrated transgender people.

The virtual walkout occurred at Netflix's Vine Street offices in Los Angeles, California, on Wednesday, and coincided with an in-person protest outside the offices that was attended by hundreds of people. It had been planned since last week, when three trans employees were [temporarily suspended](#) and CEO Ted Sarandos made several public statements repudiating claims that transphobic content leads to real-world harm.

The media company [has already fired](#) the lead organizer of the protest, allegedly for leaking confidential information to the press.

Video from the protests showed hundreds of people carrying signs that read "Black trans lives matter" and "Team Trans*, game workers have your back," referring to the caucus of trans employees and their supportive co-workers who planned the walkout. They chanted "what do we want? Accountability! When do we want it? Now!"

Several prominent trans figures also came to the rally and spoke, including Ashlee Marie Preston, a Black trans activist who is editor of Wear Your Voice Magazine. Prior to the protest, Preston joined other LGBTQ figures, many of whom have done shows with Netflix or that have been streamed by Netflix, including Peppermint, Jonathan Van Ness, Angelica Ross, Mason Alexander Park, Jameela Jamil and Colton Haynes, in a [video expressing and explaining](#) their solidarity with the Netflix employees' struggle.

A much smaller group of counter-protesters carried signs that said "we like jokes" and chanted "Dave is funny, jokes are funny."

Netflix issued a statement on Wednesday ahead of the walkout acknowledging the "deep hurt that's been caused."

"We value our trans colleagues and allies, and understand the deep hurt that's been caused," a Netflix spokesperson said. "We respect the decision of any employee who chooses to walk out, and recognize we have much more work to do both within Netflix and in our content."

Employees Demand More Trans Content

The employees have sent a letter to Sarandos detailing a list of demands in the wake of his refusal to remove the Chappelle special, titled "The Closer," from Netflix's online streaming service. However, removal is notably absent from the letter, [according to The Verge](#), which obtained a copy.

Their demands include additional funding to develop trans talent; adding an amount of trans and nonbinary content to balance it out with transphobic content; revising internal processes on the release of potentially harmful content; adding a disclaimer to programs that contain harmful content; and recruiting trans and nonbinary leadership, including content executives. They also ask the company to acknowledge the harm it's caused by airing transphobic content, especially to Black trans women.

In an [interview with Variety](#) on Tuesday, Sarandos seemed amenable to some of their demands, including increasing funding for trans and nonbinary content. However, he continued to reject the assertion that Chappelle's jokes, which hinged on the idea that trans women are actually men, could cause real-world harm.

Netflix [reported on Wednesday](#) that its profits had increase 1.8 times in the third quarter of 2021 over the same period last year, bringing in \$7.5 billion in that time. They predicted that fourth quarter earnings will top \$7.7 billion, with both increases being driven in large part by the release of South Korean drama "[Squid Game.](#)"

Judge Grilled for Supporting Trans Rights

However, those same ideas also made an appearance on Capitol Hill on Wednesday as [Holly Thomas appeared](#) for a confirmation hearing for her appointment to the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

Senators Ted Cruz (R-TX), Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Josh Hawley (R-MO) challenged Thomas for a brief she filed in 2016 against a "bathroom bill" that would have barred trans people from using the bathroom of their gender. They cited an [alleged incident](#) in Virginia in which a person, claimed by opponents to be trans but whose gender identity has not been actually verified, sexually assaulted two girls in the school bathroom after the district adopted a trans-inclusive bathroom policy.

"Do you have concerns about girls being assaulted in bathrooms by transgender women?" Grassley asked. Hawley and Cruz posed [similar questions](#), referring to trans women as "biological males."

Also on Wednesday, LGBTQ news site [Them reported](#) that a man had recently been charged for the August murder of a Latina trans woman named Zoella Rose Martinez, and that a Black trans woman named Royal Poetical Starz had been found shot to death more than 20 times in her vehicle.

This year alone, at least 41 known murders of trans people have happened in the US. The American Medical Association has warned that trans people face "[an epidemic of violence.](#)" with dozens murdered every year, often in brutal ways and often by men disgusted by their own attraction to the victim.

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Iran Prepares for Nationwide Air Drills After Israel Ok's Special Strike Budget
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) is preparing to begin the tenth annual nationwide air drills, codenamed Fada'eeyan-e Harim-e Velayat, or "Defenders of the Velayat Sanctuary." This year, however, they come amid rising tensions with Israel, which recently approved a special budget to prepare for striking Iran's nuclear facilities.

The drills will be widespread, involving as many as five air bases scattered across the massive country and including the wide variety of aircraft in the IRIAF's inventory, Iran's [PressTV reported](#). They are scheduled to begin on Thursday and last until Friday.

According to the report, the drills will involve strike aircraft as well as interceptors, drones, transport and reconnaissance aircraft. They will fly from Shahid Babaei Airbase in the central Isfahan Province and Shahid Fakouri Airbase in East Azarbaijan Province in the country's far west, among other locations.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, IRIAF Commander Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi said the maneuvers will be an "assessment of combat capabilities of IRIAF units, increasing preparedness of interceptors, practicing the implementation of reconnaissance and operational plans, and establishment of a right model that would suit real-life battle."

He added that the drills would test the "long-range endurance of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force fighter jets outside their defensive spheres, pinpoint accuracy of bombs and rockets in air-to-surface strikes as well as surveillance of the operational zone."

Iran has accumulated a wide variety of aircraft over the years, although most of its air forces are rather dated. American fighter aircraft like F-5 Tigers, F-4 Phantom IIs and F-14A Tomcats can be spotted alongside Soviet-made MiG-29s and Su-24s and even Chinese J-7s, which are themselves a copy of the Soviet MiG-21.

The Iranians, who were largely cut off from buying new weapons by the United States following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, have had to innovate to keep their air forces relevant, including updating avionics, radars, and other equipment and even developing spin-off fighters, like the Saeqeh and Kosar fighters, which are based on an F-5 airframe.

The drills will also feature Karrar, Kian, Ababil, Arash and Kaman-12 unmanned aerial vehicles, all of which carry a variety of offensive weapons and jamming equipment, as well as Boeing 707 and Boeing 747 airliners modified to perform cargo and aerial refueling roles.

The sanctions that barred Tehran from buying military equipment abroad expired in late 2020, but due to continued economic pressure by the US, they have not made any new equipment purchases. However, in August they [unveiled a new version](#) of the Bavar-373 ground-based air defense system that developers at the Organisation of Electronic Industries boast can exceed the capabilities of Russia's S-400 Triumf system.

While the drills are annual, this year's Defenders of the Velayat Sanctuary exercises come just days after Jerusalem [approved a \\$1.5 billion](#) budget for preparing a potential strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Israel has claimed Iran is pursuing a nuclear bomb, which would pose a threat to the Jewish State; however, Tehran has forsworn weapons of mass destruction and Israeli military [intelligence has said](#) "they are not heading toward a bomb right now." Iran has increased the volume and purity of its enriched uranium stocks since 2018, after the US unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions, claiming without evidence that Iran was secretly breaking the deal's terms. A [seventh round](#) of talks on returning to the deal is expected next month.

Israel has been preparing for a strike against Iran since January, [according to IDF](#) Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi, although it has no weapons capable of penetrating the mountains under which Iran's central nuclear facilities, such as the fuel enrichment plant at Fordow, have been built. Israeli confidence behind its ability to perform such a strike is based largely upon their 1981 [bombing of Iraq's Osirak](#) nuclear reactor, which was deep in Iraqi territory but above ground and unfortified.

Majid Takht Ravanchi, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, [recently warned Israel](#) against "any miscalculation or military adventure targeting Iran and its nuclear program."

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US At-Tanf Base in Syria Attacked With Missiles, Drones by 'Iran-Backed Militias', CENTCOM Says

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Reports on social media indicated that the American garrison at At-Tanf had come under attack late on Wednesday night by a number of unmanned aerial vehicles.

According to local reports, as many as five drones were involved in the attack, including at least one suicide drone, with "some coming from Iraq-Syria border," a source [told a BBC reporter](#).

There are no reports of casualties at present.

The identity of the attackers is so far unknown. A spokesperson for US Central Command told [Sky News Arabia](#) that initial assessments suggested "Iran-backed militias" had attacked the base.

[CENTCOM later clarified](#) to the BBC that "both unmanned aerial systems and indirect fire" were used against at-Tanf, and said that "We maintain the inherent right of self-defense and will respond at a time and place of our choosing."

The remote desert base, located along the M2 Baghdad-Damascus highway near Syria's border with Iraq and Jordan, has been held by American troops since early 2016, when the base was used to [train so-called "moderate rebels"](#) fighting against the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Last week, an Israeli Air Force air attack against Syrian infrastructure near Palmyra was launched from near the at-Tanf base. [According to the Russian](#) Ministry of Defense, Israel used the cover of civilian aircraft passing through the same airspace in order to deny Syrian air defense systems the opportunity to shoot down their missiles.

On October 14, the command of the Allied Operations Room of Syria, the pro-Syrian, anti-Daesh* alliance of forces that includes advisers from Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), [pledged to respond](#) to the Palmyra attack.

"For years, we have been subjected to attacks from the Israeli and American enemy in an attempt to drag us into side battles that were not a priority for our presence in Syria. The Zionists' excuse [for the attacks] was that they were targeting precision weapons and sensitive equipment that posed a threat to their usurping entity," the statement said.

"Based on the above, and after the attack that was launched through the skies of Jordan and the US-occupied Syrian area of al-Tanf, the command of the Allied Operations Room has taken a decision to respond to this attack in retaliation for the lives of the martyrs and the blood of the wounded. The response will be very harsh," it continued.

US forces located in Syria, which are deployed at At-Tanf and across the eastern Deir-ez-Zor, Raqqa and Al-Hasakah provinces, are not present with the permission of the Syrian government in Damascus.

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Ten Years Since Libya's Gaddafi Was Murdered by NATO-Backed Rebels
By - Morgan Artyukhina

October 20, 2021, marks ten years since the revolutionary leader of Libya Muammar Gaddafi was killed by rebel forces who had overthrown his government with extensive support from NATO forces. A decade later, what had been Africa's most prosperous nation is fractured and crumbling.

"Before 2011, Libyans were the masters of their destiny. Since then we've seen 10 years of injustice, bombing, killing and kidnapping," Mohammad Abi Hamra, a resident of Bani Walid, [told France 24](#) on Wednesday.

"Revolution is meant to bring change for the better. But what has happened since 2011 hasn't been a real revolution, it has been a conspiracy against Libya," he added.

The town of 85,000 remained loyal to Gaddafi to the end, and support for his legacy remains strong in the city. Today, they support one of the late leader's sons, Saif al-Islam, who entered [the running last month](#) for the Libyan presidency, to be decided in elections at the end of the year.

However, a decade of civil war has made the position essentially meaningless. In the west, the UN-approved Government of National Accord under Fayez al-Sarraj rules from the traditional capital of Tripoli, while the east is dominated by the Libyan National Army under the command of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, whose base is in the fortress of Tobruk, near the Egyptian border.

Gaddafi came to power in 1969 in a coup d'etat that overthrew the monarchy of King Idris, which was supported by the former colonial power Italy and the Greek dictatorship of Georgios Papadopoulos. While motivated by Arab socialism, they rejected Marxism-Leninism due to its atheism and instead incorporated significant socialist elements into an Islamic government of [direct democracy](#), which Gaddafi ultimately named the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. However, Gaddafi remained its titular leader and representative on the global stage. Based upon nationalization of the country's massive oil wealth, Libya under Gaddafi implemented extensive social welfare programs including free education, healthcare, electricity, and even interest-free loans. Having a home was considered a human right. Libya went from a backwards backwater to a rich, educated, urban society.

Not only was Libya debt-free, but it helped other African countries to [escape their debts](#) to European nations and to institutions like the International Monetary Fund, which [requires lendees to restructure](#) their economies along neoliberal, free market lines. A committed pan-Africanist, Gaddafi helped establish the African Union and was [laying the groundwork](#) for a separate African central bank.

Gaddafi's 42-year-rule was brought to a swift end in early 2011, when protests supported by the West erupted early on during the Arab Spring uprisings, which had begun in nearby Tunisia. When those protests turned to armed revolt, and the Libyan military responded in kind, NATO quickly organized air and cruise missile strikes that gave the rebels the upper hand.

By October 20, Gaddafi only controlled a small area around his hometown of Sirte. After his convoy was attacked by NATO aircraft, he sought cover in a protected culvert, where he was found. On live video, the revolutionary leader was beaten by his rebel captors and sodomized with a bayonet before he died. His body was frozen for several days, to confirm that he was really dead.

Later that day, then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was informed of Gaddafi's death during an interview. "We came, we saw, he died," she cackled, imitating the boast by the ancient Roman conqueror Julius Caesar after conquering the Kingdom of Pontus in 47 BCE.

Today, Libya's once-glorious cities lie in ruins, the houses that every citizen was once entitled to are bombed out concrete hulks. Open-air slave markets have brought human trafficking on a horrific scale as migrants fleeing conflicts across Africa try to risk a water crossing to Europe. Daesh* and other terrorist groups have flourished in the chaos, seizing the country's remote desert interior and spreading across much of West Africa.

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Brian Landrie Search: Coroner Called After Items Belonging to Landrie Were Found
By - Adriana Montes

Suspected human remains have reportedly been found near the area where Brian Landrie's things were discovered, according to a law enforcement officer.

A coroner and a cadaver dog were called on Wednesday to a Florida park hours after fugitive Brian Landrie's parents and authorities found several items belonging to Landrie.

Landrie's family attorney Steven Bertolino [confirmed](#) to Fox News Digital that Landrie's parents, Chris and Roberta Landrie, had set out into Florida's Myakkahatchee Creek Environmental Park on Wednesday morning and met with North Port Police and FBI agents to continue the search for their missing son.

During the search, an officer allegedly told both parents that law enforcement "might have found something." The couple is then seen moving in and out of the brushed areas before discovering a white bag and a dark-colored object that they stumbled upon while roaming through the park's tangled shrubs.

In the [footage](#) released Wednesday, the Laundries are seen placing the object inside the bag and handing it over to the law enforcement officer.

The Laundries, who appeared distraught when confronted by protesters, left the park shortly after and are said to have returned home.

Bertolino later confirmed that while searching areas that Brian frequented, "some articles belonging to Brian were found on the trail," but did not provide any further information.

The attorney refused to comment on news of the medical examiner's office being called to the area.

A spokesperson for the Sarasota County Medical Examiner's Office [reportedly](#) confirmed that the office was called to the Myakkahatchee on Wednesday "at the request of law enforcement."

The park, which reopened to the public on Tuesday after being closed for nearly a month, is now closed to the public for the "search to continue." North Port Police have reportedly blocked off both entrances.

Laundrie, who has been wanted on suspicion of bank fraud after the death of his fiance Gabby Petito, has been missing since September 13. He was named a person of interest in the disappearance and homicide of Petito.

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New Findings in 'Church of the Apostles' in Bethsaida, Archaeologists Discovered
By - Adriana Montes

Initial excavations at El-Araj in 2019 identified it with the Church of the Apostles visited by a Bavarian bishop named Willibald in 725 C.E. The findings revealed the remains of a large Byzantine church — complete with multicolored mosaics in geometric patterns, built over the house of the apostles Peter and Andrew, on the shore of Galilee.

During the fifth season of archaeological excavations at the site of Beit Habek (el-Araj), researchers [identified](#) inscriptions that helped solidify their belief that this was the church of Jesus' disciples, the real Bethsaida on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

The location of Bethsaida, a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, visited by Jesus (Luke 9:10) and home to apostles Peter, Andrew and Philip (John 1:44), according to the Gospels, [was said](#) to have been destroyed and mysteriously "buried" by an earthquake in 749 along with the "lost home of Jesus's apostles."

For the past five years, Professor Mordechai Aviam in collaboration with Professor R. Steven Notley — both researchers from Nyack College and Mordechai Aviam of Kinneret Academic College of the Galilee — have led teams of archaeologists, students and Bible enthusiasts on yearly excavations in El-Araj.

In 2020, excavations were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic and flooding caused by near record-breaking rainfall in Galilee. Notley and Aviam returned to El-Araj during the summer of 2021 with hopes of exposing the entire mosaic floor discovered in 2019, and finding inscriptions within the ruins of the Byzantine church that could help them date and properly identify the site as the home of Andrew and Peter.

The [2021 excavation season 5](#), which took place from October 1 through October 15, opened new squares in an effort to reveal the size and more of the Roman structures that were underneath the surface of the Byzantine church.

During the summer excavation just completed, researchers found proof that the Byzantine-period edifice was a major church — an elaborately decorated house of worship built in the late fifth or early sixth century with gorgeous mosaic floors and inscriptions. Subject to further archeological investigation, researchers hypothesize that the doorless structure with sealed ruins could presumably be the basement of a Middle-Aged sugar factory that was built there, or that the church was intentionally or “ritually buried” after its destruction out of respect.

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Jake Sullivan Discussed Israel Normalization With Saudi Crown Prince - Report
By - Adriana Montes

In September last year, Bahrain and the UAE signed the US-brokered Abraham Accords to normalize ties with the Jewish State. Sudan and Morocco established diplomatic relations with Tel-Aviv in October and December 2020, respectively. Speculation then emerged that the Saudis may follow suit.

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan raised the possibility of Saudi Arabia normalizing relations with Israel during his meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman last month, Axios reported Wednesday.

The Saudi crown prince did not reject Sullivan’s normalization proposal outright during their meeting on September 27 in the Red Sea City of Neom. Instead, bin Salman reportedly said it would take some time and presented Sullivan with a list of measures that have to be met first — including warming of ties with the US, according to a Wednesday report that cited three US and Arab sources.

The steps included an improvement in bilateral US-Saudi relations, which have become strained since the election of US President Joe Biden, who set expectations for Saudi Arabia to improve its record on human rights — a key issue in US-Saudi relations.

Any Saudi agreement to normalize relations with Israel would require significant steps by Israel on the Palestinian issue, the report noted. Riyadh has long stated that it would not normalize with Israel until the [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#) is solved and a Palestinian state is established based on the pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Back in 2018, in an [interview](#) with the US-based The Atlantic magazine, the 32-year-old heir declared that Israel had the right to its own land alongside the Palestinians. “I believe that each people, anywhere, has a right to live in their peaceful nation.” The crown prince added that “there are a lot of interests” his country shares with Israel.

The Biden administration had pledged to “realign” the relationship with Saudi Arabia in its meeting with Saudi officials in February, after the US released a declassified [intelligence report](#)

implicating Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the killing of Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#).

Biden officials also vowed to expand the [Abraham Accords](#) at their one-year anniversary, a carryover of the Trump administration, to actively work to support and expand the growing diplomatic ties between Israel and the Arab nations.

The Abraham Accords created a shift in Arab-Israeli relations — as Arab states including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan and Sudan — agreed to formally and publicly establish diplomatic relations with Israel amid an upsurge in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Saudis were [said to have supported](#) the UAE's decision to sign a peace treaty with Israel — and helped facilitate the agreement by opening its airspace to Israeli aircraft for direct flights from Dubai to Abu Dhabi.

After returning from Neom, Sullivan held a public meeting Thursday with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud in Washington to discuss "US-Saudi strategic cooperation on regional issues along with broader issues." Neither country, however, mentioned normalization with Israel in their public statements about the meeting.

US Secretary of State Antony John Blinken met with Sullivan recently to discuss expanding the Abraham Accords in their meetings with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid. A senior Israeli official [allegedly](#) informed reporters after Lapid's visit that at least one country would "definitely" be joining the other Arab countries in signing the accords.

According to the [report](#), senior White House officials told a conference call of Jewish leaders last Friday that the US was "quietly" engaging several Arab and Muslim countries on the issue of normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel.

Several Trump administration officials allegedly boasted in private that they would have sealed an agreement with Saudi Arabia within a year if Trump had been reelected.

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Rat-Spread Disease Caused by Urine Kills 1, Sickens 2, NYC Health Officials Say
By - Adriana Montes

NYC suffers from the highest rate of rat infestation, making them the most common culprit for causing leptospirosis.

New York City is reporting an alarming increase in the number of people diagnosed with leptospirosis — a bacterial disease that is largely associated with exposure to rats.

In a late September [advisory](#), New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene reported that 14 cases of human leptospirosis had been identified this year, in all boroughs except Staten Island.

The number of cases reported to the city's health department was higher than any previous year.

Thirteen of the fourteen people were hospitalized with kidney and liver failure, and two suffered from severe pulmonary issues. One person died as a result of infection, while all of the hospitalized patients were treated and discharged.

"One person acquired their infection while traveling," the advisory stated. "Among the thirteen locally acquired cases, most cases had a clear history or risk factor which exposed them to an environment with a severe rat infestation. Three cases reported homelessness."

Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that can spread from animals to humans. It's caused by bacteria of the genus *Leptospira* and most cases occur through contact with the urine of an infected animal, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).

Infections can also occur through contaminated water, soil or food. Bacteria can enter the body through the eyes, nose, mouth or an open wound.

Symptoms of leptospirosis tend to be flu-like and can be mistaken with many other health conditions — while some people do not experience any symptoms.

According to the CDC, if Leptospirosis goes untreated, it can lead to kidney damage, meningitis, liver failure, respiratory distress, and even death.

New York City public health officials are urging people to avoid places where rats may have urinated and to sanitize areas with bleach where rats may have been — as well as warning health care providers to be on the lookout for the disease.

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RPT - US Anti-War Activist Says Ex-Wife Contacted by FBI Over His Russia, Venezuela Trips

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) coordinator Joe Lombardo told Sputnik that the FBI contacted his former spouse about trips he took to Russia and Venezuela, which he sees as an effort to undermine the activist movement.

"I don't really know the purpose but I assume it was to intimidate our movement and me and to try to get information that might be used against us," Lombardo said when asked about the FBI contacting his former wife. "Although our activity is not illegal, the government has been more aggressive lately toward people who dissent from their policies."

Lombardo said the trips to Russia and Venezuela were done on behalf of UNAC.

"I've been twice to Russia. One time I was invited to speak at an antiwar conference and the other time I spoke on a panel at the World Festival of Youth and Students that took place in Sochi in 2017. Following that conference, I went to Moscow and spoke at meetings that were organized for me at two universities," he said. "I was in Venezuela with a delegation of antiwar activists in 2019 where we met with President [Nicolas] Maduro and others."

Prior to the FBI contacting his former spouse, Lombardo said he and other activists met with the Venezuelan delegation to the UN General Assembly at the Venezuelan Consulate in New York. The meeting was organized by the Sanctions Kill Coalition.

Lombardo pointed out that the US government has also cracked down on other activist movements, including Black Lives Matter.

"Recently, they put antiwar military veteran Daniel Hale in prison for four years. He was part of the drone program in Afghanistan and let people know that the US drones were killing mostly civilians," Lombardo said. "The government claimed he got that information from classified sources and prosecuted him as they did Chelsea Manning."

Lombardo revealed that with respect to the UNAC, the government went after 23 activists from some of its coalition members several years ago.

"They raided their home, took their computer, phones, photographs, etc. and tried to build a case that their antiwar activity was giving aid to terrorists," he said. "It is possible that the US government is now trying something similar."

Lombardo went on to say that the FBI contact took place after the United States defeat in Afghanistan as the antiwar movement continually opposed and protested the invasion and occupation of that country.

"It also comes at a time that many countries are getting together and successfully opposing their economic sanctions and at a time that China is challenging the US hegemony economically, politically and militarily. I believe this is putting the United States in a more desperate position," he said.

Lombardo emphasized, however, that the FBI actions will not have an effect on his activities.

"I think this shows that the United States is vulnerable to public opinion and that we have been having an effect," he said.

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Trump's Media Group Going Public, Launching Social Network

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The Trump Media and Technology Group (TMTG) said it will become a publicly listed company as an alternative to liberal media and will launch a social network named TRUTH Social.

"Trump Media & Technology Group and Digital World Acquisition Corp. (NASDAQ: DWAC) have entered into a definitive merger agreement, providing for a business combination that will result in Trump Media & Technology Group becoming a publicly listed company, subject to regulatory and stockholder approval," TMTG said in a statement Wednesday.

Former President Donald Trump, the company chairman, in the statement said he created TRUTH Social and TMTG "to stand up to the tyranny of Big Tech."

"We live in a world where the Taliban has a huge presence on Twitter, yet your favorite American President has been silenced. This is unacceptable. I am excited to send out my first TRUTH on TRUTH Social very soon. TMTG was founded with a mission to give a voice to all. I'm excited to soon begin sharing my thoughts on TRUTH Social and to fight back against Big Tech. Everyone asks me why doesn't someone stand up to Big Tech? Well, we will be soon!" Trump said.

TRUTH Social is now available for Pre-Order in the Apple App store and plans a Beta Launch for invited guests in November 2021, according to the release. A nationwide rollout is expected in the first quarter of 2022 for those who sign up at www.truthsocial.com.

Additionally, TMTG said it intends to launch a subscription video on demand service (TMTG+). TMTG+ will feature "non-woke" entertainment programming, news, and podcasts, according to the release.

The company also said the transaction values TMTG at an initial enterprise value of \$875 Million, with a potential additional earnout of \$825 million in additional shares for a cumulative valuation of up to \$1.7 billion.

Additional information about the transaction, the company said, will be provided in a Current Report on form 8-K to be filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission and available at www.sec.gov.

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in Trump Media & Technology Group becoming a publicly listed company, subject to regulatory and stockholder approval," TMTG said in a statement.

Former President Donald Trump, the company chairman, in the statement said he created TRUTH Social and TMTG "to stand up to the tyranny of Big Tech."

"We live in a world where the Taliban has a huge presence on Twitter, yet your favorite American President has been silenced. This is unacceptable. I am excited to send out my first TRUTH on TRUTH Social very soon. TMTG was founded with a mission to give a voice to all. I'm excited to soon begin sharing my thoughts on TRUTH Social and to fight back against Big Tech. Everyone asks me why doesn't someone stand up to Big Tech? Well, we will be soon!" Trump said.

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US Senator Scott Calls on DHS Chief to Resign for 'Lying' About Border Being Secure

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - US Republican Senator Rick Scott called on Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to resign for lying about the United States' border with Mexico being secure.

"He's lied about the border being secure. He's lied about the crisis the Biden admin has clearly caused. He won't take responsibility or fix it. Enough is enough. Mayorkas must resign NOW," Scott said in a tweet on Wednesday.

During a Senate roundtable discussion, Scott said Mayorkas lied to a Homeland Security panel about providing them with the information they needed for oversight of the border crisis and complying with the law.

Earlier this year, Mayorkas was caught on a hot mic admitting the border was in a crisis, but refused to admit it publicly, echoing the White House's perspective on the situation.

However, US President Joe Biden eventually admitted there was a border crises as the number of apprehensions hit record numbers over the last several months.

The total number of apprehensions on the southern border since October 2020 - the beginning of the US government's fiscal year - has now surpassed 1.5 million. Illegal crossings on the US southern border hit a 20-year monthly high under the Biden administration, which saw about 212,000 migrant encounters.

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US Bans Disposable Glove Imports From Malaysia's Supermax Over Forced Labor Charges - DHS

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The United States will immediately ban the import of disposable gloves made by Supermax Corporation due to information the company uses forced labor to make its products, the Department of Homeland Security said in a press release.

"CBP [Customs and Border Protection] issued a Withhold Release Order (WRO) against Supermax Corporation Bhd. and its subsidiaries based on information that reasonably indicates their use of forced labor in manufacturing operations," Homeland Security said on Wednesday. "CBP identified 10 of the international Labor Organization's indicators of forced labor during its investigation."

Starting Thursday, all disposable gloves made by Supermax Corporation Bhd's wholly-owned subsidiaries Maxter Glove Manufacturing Sdn. Bhd., Maxwell Glove Manufacturing Bhd., and Supermax Glove Manufacturing will be detained at US ports of entry, the release said.

The release said CBP has ample evidence to support that the Malaysia-based company Supermax violated US trade law.

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Middle East Commercial Jet Market to Double in Value to \$1.4 Trillion By 2040 - Boeing

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The value of the Middle East commercial jet and services market is going to double to more than \$1.4 trillion by 2040, Boeing announced in its annual Commercial Market Outlook (CMO).

"Boeing said... airlines in the Middle East will require 3,000 new airplanes valued at \$700 billion and aftermarket services such as maintenance and repair worth \$740 billion, with the region positioned to capitalize on the recovery of regional and international travel and cargo demand," the CMO said on Wednesday.

To accommodate increased passenger and cargo traffic, airlines are predicted to grow their fleets to 3,530 jets. The region will continue to see robust wide-body commercial jet demand, with 1,570 deliveries supporting a growing network of international routes, the CMO said.

"The current single-aisle fleet of 660 airplanes is forecast to nearly triple to 1,750 jets. ... the region is estimated to require 223,000 new aviation personnel by 2040, including 54,000 pilots, 51,000 technicians and 91,000 cabin crew members," the CMO said.

Middle East passenger traffic and commercial fleets are projected to double over the 20-year forecast period, the CMO added.

More than two-thirds of airplane deliveries to the Middle East will be new aircraft, while one-third of deliveries will replace older planes with more fuel-efficient models, according to the CMO.

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US Couple Plead Not Guilty to Espionage, Alleged Sale of Nuclear Submarine Info - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - A couple being charged with espionage for the alleged sale of classified nuclear submarine intelligence to what they believed to be a foreign government pleaded not guilty in a US court, CBS Baltimore reported.

The couple, Jonathan and Diana Toebbe, are accused of attempting to sell military secrets obtained through Jonathan's job as a US Navy nuclear engineer to what they believed to be a foreign government, but was actually an FBI sting operation.

The Toebbes allegedly sent a package containing sensitive information to a foreign government, who held onto the information for some time before turning it over to US authorities, who then began investigating its sender.

FBI Special Agent Peter Olinits testified in the court about the measures taken by the Toebbes for operational security during their "dead drop" deliveries to the undercover FBI investigators, the report said.

He said that authorities have yet to recover the \$100,000 paid in cryptocurrency to the couple as part of the sting or the large amount of classified information they offered to the FBI agents, they added.

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US Navy Calls Destruction of Warship in July Fire 'Completely Preventable' - Report

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Damage from a July 2020 fire that destroyed US warship Bonhomme Richard could have been prevented, the Navy said in a report that blamed the four-day blaze on inadequate training of the ship's crew and ineffective oversight of commanders.

"The loss of this ship was completely preventable. And the Navy is executing a deliberative process that includes taking appropriate accountability actions with respect to personnel assigned to Bonhomme Richard and the shore commands designed to support the ship while moored at Naval Base San Diego," Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Bill Lescher said in a press release explaining the report on Wednesday.

The report cited four causal factors responsible for ineffective fire-fighting efforts, which resulted in the Navy's decision to decommission the amphibious assault vessel: the ship's condition, training and readiness of the ship's crew, integration between the ship and shore-based firefighting organizations and oversight by commanders across multiple organizations.

Arson by a disgruntled Navy sailor was blamed for starting the July 12, 2020 fire, which was berthed in the US port of San Diego for repairs and maintenance. Scaffolding reportedly blocked access by firefighters and combustible materials for maintenance fueled a blaze that burned for four days.

Thirty-six people have been recommended for some form of discipline, Lescher told reporters in a conference call earlier on Wednesday, as reported by US media.

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Biden Sends Nomination for Lead Sanctions Coordination Office to US Senate - White House

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden sent to the US Senate his nomination for head of the recently-relaunched Sanctions Coordination Office, the White House said.

Biden sent his nomination of James O'Brien to be Head of the Office of Sanctions Coordination, the White House said on Wednesday.

The Biden administration relaunched the office earlier this year after the Trump administration closed it in 2017. Its function is to align US sanctions policies and their implementation across the federal government.

O'Brien served in various positions at the State Department as well as Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, Senior Adviser to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Principal Deputy Director of Policy Planning and Presidential Envoy for the Balkans.

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US Regulator Approves Use of Booster Shots for Moderna, Janssen COVID-19 Vaccines

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said that it has approved the use of third doses of the Moderna and Johnson and Johnson (Janssen) vaccines against the novel coronavirus for eligible individuals.

"The use of a single booster dose of the Janssen COVID-19 vaccine may be administered at least 2 months after completion of the single-dose primary regimen to individuals 18 years of age and older," the FDA said in a press release on Wednesday.

In addition, the FDA said it has authorized the use of the Moderna vaccine at least six months after eligible individuals received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Individuals may qualify for a third dose of the Moderna vaccine if they are 65 years of age and older, considered high risk of severe infection or their job exposes them to the novel coronavirus, the release said.

In addition, the FDA said individuals may receive a booster shot from a different manufacturer compared to the doses they received earlier this year, the release added.

The FDA approved the use of booster shots for the Pfizer vaccine in September.

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US House Passes Bill Banning Equipment Licenses for Firms Deemed National Security Threats

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a bill prohibiting the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) from issuing equipment licenses to businesses that are considered to pose national security threats to the United States. The House passed the measure on Wednesday in a 420-4 vote and will send the measure to the Senate for consideration.

Democratic Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, one of the authors of the bill, said in a previous press release that the legislation is intended to prevent equipment manufactured by Chinese firms like Huawei, ZTE, Hytera, Hikvision and Dahua from being further utilized or marketed in the United States.

In 2020, the FCC published a blacklist of telecommunications companies considered to be national security threats to the United States and banned the use of federal funds for purchasing equipment from those companies. However, the items can still be privately purchased on the open market.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) -

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON AFGHANISTAN

* The Taliban (banned in Russia) has not yet decided on whether it will participate in the meeting of foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighboring countries in Tehran, Khairullah Khairkhwa, acting minister of culture and information of the Afghan interim government, told Sputnik.

* The United Nations is aware of Russia's call to hold a donor conference on Afghanistan, but has nothing to announce on the proposal yet, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said.

* The United Nations has not been engaged in the Moscow format meeting on Afghanistan, but will be in contact with all the partners concerned, Haq said.

* The participants in the Moscow format meeting on Afghanistan were divided in their assessment of the composition of the country's new government, acting foreign minister in the Taliban government Amir Khan Muttaqi said.

EUROPE ENERGY SUPPLIES

* Russia is not interested in a gas price surge in Europe because this can have consequences, including for Gazprom, President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday.

* Rising energy prices are challenging the post-pandemic recovery of the European Union, President of the European Council Charles Michel said.

* Germany maintains regular contact with Russia regarding energy supplies, German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said.

TERRORIST ATTACK IN SYRIA

* Russia believes it is not a coincidence that a terrorist attack targeting Syrian soldiers occurred at a time when the Constitutional Committee meeting is taking place on in Geneva, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.

* The United Nations denounces the attack on an army bus in the center of Damascus, which killed 14 soldiers on Wednesday, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said.

RUSSIA-BELARUS MILITARY COOPERATION

* Western military threats and political and economic pressure are forcing Russia and Belarus to take retaliatory measures, which include a new military doctrine of the Union State, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Wednesday.

* Russia and Belarus have agreed to hold large-scale military exercises named "Shield of Union" in 2023, Shoigu said.

OLEG DERIPASKA CASE IN US

* The Kremlin does not yet have information about the reasons for searches in a Washington mansion presumably belonging to Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska, spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday, stressing that Moscow is ready to protect the rights of Russian citizens.

* Deripaska condemned the FBI raids of the homes of his relatives in the United States, adding that the "stupidity" on the part of the US establishment never ceases to amaze him.

COVID-19

* Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday signed a decree on non-working days in Russia from October 30 to November 7, the Kremlin said.

* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Wednesday that he is ready to get vaccinated against COVID-19 but with a Belarusian vaccine, the state-run Belta news agency reported.

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Ireland, Estonia, France Condemn N. Korea's Missile Launches - Irish Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, October 20 (Sputnik) - Ireland, Estonia and France condemned the most recent ballistic missile launches by North Korea and called on the international community to comply with their obligation to strictly enforce sanctions against the country, Irish Ambassador to the United Nations Geraldine Byrne Nason said on Wednesday.

"Ireland, Estonia and France are deeply concerned by the reported test of a submarine-launched ballistic missile by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on October 18. We firmly condemn this provocative action which constitutes a clear violation of UN Security Council resolutions," Byrne Nason said. "We call on the international community to comply with

the obligation to strictly enforce [the] sanctions, including by reporting on their implementation, in accordance with the resolutions adopted by the Council."

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UPDATE - US Stocks End Mostly Higher on Strong US Earnings, Dow at Record High

NEW YORK, October 20 (Sputnik) - US stocks closed mostly higher on Wednesday, with the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average hitting all-time highs, amid stellar earnings reported by American companies for the third quarter.

Wall Street icon Goldman Sachs, healthcare giant Johnson & Johnson, consumer products behemoth Procter & Gamble and streaming service Netflix are among companies that have reported better-than-expected profits for the quarter. On the technology front, Apple rolled out new accessories this week while Google introduced its latest line of phones.

"Earnings season is off to a strong start which is continuing to buoy stock markets and keep investors on board," Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

The combination has fueled gains not just on the Dow but also the blue-chip S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks. The tech-laced Nasdaq Composite settled almost unchanged on profit-taking after hefty gains earlier in the day.

The Dow closed up 152 points, or 0.4%, at 35,609. It hit a record high of 35,670 earlier and is up 5.2% for October.

The S&P 500 index finished up 18 points, or 0.4%, at 4,538. The blue-chip indicator rose to a high of 4,541 earlier, coming less than five points from a record high. The S&P 500 is also up 5.3% for October.

Nasdaq, comprising Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, settled down 7 points, or virtually flat. It is up 4.7% on the month.

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White House Says Raised Concern About China's Hypersonic Missile Via Diplomatic Channels

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The White House is concerned over the recent hypersonic missile test conducted by China and has already raised the issue with Beijing via diplomatic channels, spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"[W]e have made clear our concerns and I think the President's comments were reflective of this about the military capabilities that the PRC [People's Republic of China] continues to pursue. So, that continues to be our point of view, and obviously we raised that through diplomatic channels," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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CIA Chief Says Possibility Still Exists of Coming Back Into Full Compliance With JCPOA

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns said on Wednesday that the possibility of coming back into full compliance with the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), still exists. "There is still a possibility of coming back into full compliance with the JCPOA," Burns said. "There is a big question mark of how serious the new Iranian government is in that as well. But there is still willingness and President Biden has made clear to do that."

In 2015, Iran signed the nuclear agreement with the P5+1 group of countries comprising the United States, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom plus Germany as well as with the European Union. The agreement stipulates Iran must scale back its nuclear program and reduce its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including the lifting of an arms embargo five years after the accord was signed.

In 2018, the United States unilaterally withdrew from JCPOA and implemented a comprehensive sanctions policy against Iran, prompting the latter to largely abandon its own obligations under the accord.

Since April, Vienna has hosted talks aimed at reviving the JCPOA. The sixth round of the talks finished on June 20 and the negotiations have since hit a deadlock.

Over the past week, both Tehran and Washington have affirmed their readiness to revive the Vienna talks as soon as possible.

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CIA Will Have Weekly Meetings on China Following Launch of New Mission Center - Director

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) will hold weekly meetings on threats posed by China following the launch of the agency's new China mission center, CIA Director William Burns said in an interview at Stanford University on Wednesday. "We set in motion a sort of more formal review process as well, which produced a lot of thoughtful recommendations... on China, it was to create a single China mission center, as a way of ensuring that since China and that geopolitical challenge cuts across literally everything we do at the agency, to make sure that we were focusing and integrating that work in the most effective way possible. I will start shortly a weekly meeting just focused on that mission center and on China," Burns said.

Earlier this month, Burns said the CIA was launching the new mission center to address the global challenge posed by China that cuts across all of the agency's mission areas.

However, former CIA analyst and officer Philip Giraldi told Sputnik that creating a mission center could lead to misleading groupthink that impacts the entire intelligence assessment process.

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US Television Company Allegedly Hacked by Russia-Based Evil Corp. - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Sinclair Broadcast Group was allegedly hacked by infamous Russian cybercriminals from Evil Corp. group, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday citing two unnamed sources familiar with the matter.

On Monday, the United States' second largest television operator, Sinclair Broadcast, announced that its network was breached with ransomware over the weekend. The company notified relevant US federal agencies and law enforcement and an investigation is underway. The cybercriminals used malware called Macaw, a variant of ransomware known as WastedLocker. Both the Macaw and WastedLocker were created by Evil Corp., while the former was first detected by cybersecurity analysts during last week only, the report said. Sinclair Broadcast, which operates nearly 200 television stations across the United States, had data stolen from its network, but the company is still trying to assess if it will have a material impact on its business and operations, according to a company press release published on Monday.

The breach may continue to cause disruptions to the company's business operations, including local advertisements by local broadcast stations, the release added.

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US Anti-War Activist Says Ex-Wife Contacted by FBI Over His Russia, Venezuela Trips

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) coordinator Joe Lombardo told Sputnik that the FBI contacted his former spouse about trips he took to Russia and Venezuela, which he sees as an effort to undermine the activist movement.

"I don't really know the purpose but I assume it was to intimidate our movement and me and to try to get information that might be used against us," Lombardo said when asked about the FBI contacting his former wife. "Although our activity is not illegal, the government has been more aggressive lately toward people who dissent from their policies."

Lombardo said the trips to Russia and Venezuela were done on behalf of UNAC.

"I've been twice to Russia. One time I was invited to speak at an antiwar conference and the other time I spoke on a panel at the World Festival of Youth and Students that took place in Sochi in 2017. Following that conference, I went to Moscow and spoke at meetings that were organized for me at two universities," he said. "I was in Venezuela with a delegation of antiwar activists in 2019 where we met with President [Nicolas] Maduro and others."

Prior to the FBI contacting his former spouse, Lombardo said he and other activists met with the Venezuelan delegation to the UN General Assembly at the Venezuelan Consulate in New York. The meeting was organized by the Sanctions Kill Coalition.

Lombardo pointed out that the US government has also cracked down on other activist movements, including Black Lives Matter.

"Recently, they put antiwar military veteran Daniel Hale in prison for four years. He was part of the drone program in Afghanistan and let people know that the US drones were killing mostly civilians," Lombardo said. "The government claimed he got that information from classified sources and prosecuted him as they did Chelsea Manning."

Lombardo revealed that with respect to the UNAC, the government went after 23 activists from some of its coalition members several years ago.

"They raided their home, took their computer, phones, photographs, etc. and tried to build a case that their antiwar activity was giving aid to terrorists," he said. "It is possible that the US government is now trying something similar."

Lombardo went on to say that the FBI contact took place after the United States defeat in Afghanistan as the antiwar movement continually opposed and protested the invasion and occupation of that country.

"It also comes at a time that many countries are getting together and successfully opposing their economic sanctions and at a time that China is challenging the US hegemony economically, politically and militarily. I believe this is putting the United States in a more desperate position," he said.

Lombardo emphasized, however, that the FBI actions will not have an effect on his activities.

"I think this shows that the United States is vulnerable to public opinion and that we have been having an effect," he said.

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NASA Challenges Students From Kindergarten Through Grade 12 to Design Moon-Digging Robot

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - A contest open to students from early childhood through high school graduation seeks help designing a robot capable of digging into the lunar surface near the Moon's South Pole - the sight targeted for humans to land for the first time since the final Apollo mission in 1972, NASA said on Wednesday

"The competition, which is a collaboration between NASA and Future Engineers, asks students to design a robot that digs and moves lunar soil, called regolith, from an area of the lunar South Pole to a holding container near where Artemis astronauts may explore in the future," NASA said in a press release.

The Lunabotics Junior Contest is open to K-12 students in US public and private schools, as well as home-schoolers, the release said.

To enter the contest, students must submit entries with an image of their robot design and a written summary explaining how the design is intended to operate by January 25, 2022, the release added.

While students are not tasked to build a robot, they are asked to envision a robot design that is no larger than 3.5 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet, according to the release.

NASA is preparing to send astronauts to the lunar South Pole, possibly as early as 2024. Humans last walked on the Moon in December 1972 with NASA's Apollo program.

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New York City's Largest Police Union Sues Over New COVID Vaccine Mandate - President

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The largest New York City Police Department union is suing the city over its COVID-19 vaccine mandate, NYC Police Benevolent Association President Patrick Lynch said in a statement on Wednesday.

"From the beginning of the [Mayor Bill] de Blasio administration's haphazard vaccine rollout, we have fought to make the vaccine available to every member who chooses it, while also protecting their right to make that personal medical decision in consultation with their own doctor. Now that the city has moved to unilaterally impose a mandate, we will proceed with legal action to protect our members' rights," Lynch said.

De Blasio announced on Wednesday that the city's police officers, firefighters and other municipal workers need to get at least one vaccine dose by November 1 or be placed on unpaid leave.

As an incentive to get vaccinated, employees will receive an extra \$500 in their paycheck if they get their first shot at a city-run vaccination site, the city said on Wednesday in a statement.

Prior to Wednesday's mandate, the city only had vaccine mandates for government education and health workers, who have achieved vaccination rates of 96% and 95%, respectively, according to the statement.

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UNSC Calls for End to Violence, Illicit Use of Minerals in Africa's Great Lakes Region

UNITED NATIONS, October 20 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council in a statement on Wednesday unanimously demanded the cessation of all violence in Africa's Great Lakes region, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and called for the end of illegal exploitation and trade of the region's natural resources.

"The Security Council reiterates its deep concern regarding the humanitarian crisis in eastern DRC, exacerbated by widespread insecurity including the destabilizing activities of foreign and domestic armed groups, including a renewed surge in attacks by the Allied Democratic Forces,

and demands that all armed groups cease immediately all forms of violence," the statement said. "The Security Council urges... regional organizations and the international community to coordinate their efforts to undercut the economic lifelines of armed groups that benefit from the illegal exploitation and trade in natural resources."

The Council in the statement also condemned in the strongest terms all armed groups that attack civilians, peacekeepers, medical and humanitarian workers and called to hold the perpetrators accountable for the human rights abuses.

The Security Council said it recognizes that insecurity in the region, resulting from illegal trade of the so-called "conflict minerals," including tin, tantalum, gold, diamonds, cobalt, coltan and charcoal, negatively impacts conflict-prevention measures in the Great Lakes region.

It further encouraged UN agencies in close cooperation with the regional and sub-regional organizations to transform the entire natural resource extraction from illegal exploitation into a legal positive harnessing of the region's natural resources to support conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.

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US Stimulus Taper Should Start November, Rate Hike Requires More Thought - Fed Vice Chair

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve should start tapering by next month its long-running COVID-19 economic stimulus as the central bank has met required inflation and labor market tests, though raising US interest rates will need more thinking, Fed Vice Chairman Randal Quarles said Wednesday.

"Taking all of the evidence into account, I think it is clear that we have met the test of substantial further progress toward both our employment and our inflation mandates, and I would support a decision at our November meeting to start reducing these purchases and complete that process by the middle of next year," Quarles said in a speech on the US economic outlook at a live-streamed event.

The potential timing of the Fed's stimulus taper and eventual interest rate hike has kept US - and to an extent, global - markets on tenterhooks for months. Since the first major outbreak of the coronavirus in March 2020, the central bank has allocated up to \$120 billion each month to buy bonds and other assets as a form of support for the economy.

The Fed's policy-making FOMC, or Federal Open Market Committee, said in the published minutes of its September meeting released a week ago that the tapering of its stimulus could start by November or December and conclude by mid-2020.

Quarles' remarks appeared to solidify the Fed's stance on this.

The Fed vice chairman noted that until December, unemployment remained at 6.7%, near-term growth was being constrained by heightened social-distancing restrictions amid surging hospitalizations from COVID-19 and inflation was running significantly below 2%.

Now, demand for labor was strong, with unemployment having declined to 4.8%, he said.

"We have exceeded the previous high for real gross domestic product and are close to reaching the pre-COVID trend. Inflation, about which I will say more shortly, is running at more than twice the FOMC's longer-run goal," Quarles said.

Despite this, the timing for a rate hike was elusive, he added.

"I think we need to allow more time before we would think about raising interest rates, even in the face of those labor figures," the Fed vice chair said.

The Fed has kept interest rates at between zero and 0.25% since the COVID-19 outbreak. It has indicated that the first pandemic-era rate hike might take place at the end of 2022.

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Items of Interest in Search for Murder Suspect Brian Laundrie Found in Florida Park - FBI

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Items of interest in the search for murder suspect Brian Laundrie have been located in a nature reserve in the US state of Florida, the FBI office in Tampa said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Items of interest were located at the Carlton Reserve this morning in connection with the search for Brian Laundrie. An FBI Evidence Response team is processing the scene. The reserve is closed to the public and no further details are available at this time," the FBI said via Twitter.

Investigators have been searching for Laundrie in connection with the death of his fiance, Gabrielle Petito, during a cross-country road trip. The two left for the trip in July and Laundrie returned to Florida on September 1 without Petito. In mid-August, Petito and Laundrie had an encounter with police in the state of Utah as officers responded to a "domestic problem" between the two.

Petito's remains were found later in September in the Bridger-Teton National Forest in the state of Wyoming. Officials said they determined the cause of death was strangulation.

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US, UK, French, German Diplomats to Discuss Iran Nuclear Program in Paris Friday - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Iran Rob Malley will meet with diplomats from the United Kingdom, France and Germany on Friday to discuss Iran's nuclear program, Axios reported on Wednesday citing sources familiar with the matter.

The meeting will focus on the lack of progress made to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the report said.

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US House Rules Committee Approves Bannon's Criminal Contempt Referral, Sets Up Full Vote

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives Rules Committee on Wednesday approved the criminal contempt referral of former Trump aide Steve Bannon that sets up the resolution for a full vote.

The Rules Committee approved the measure in a 9-4 vote along party lines.

The resolution was drafted and first approved on Tuesday by the US House Select Committee investigating the events at the Capitol on January 6.

Contempt of Congress charges can only be pursued by the Justice Department and can result in a penalty of up to one year in prison and a fine of up to \$100,000.

US media reported the full vote could take place on Thursday.

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Support for US House January 6 Riot Probe Declines Among Republicans, Independents - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The Democrat-led US House Select Committee investigating the January 6 events at the US Capitol risks becoming just another partisan dispute amid declining support from Republicans and independents, a new Morning Consult poll revealed.

"While the panel's direction is in line with the desires of most Democratic voters, Republicans have hardened their opposition and have joined independent voters in expressing less urgency for the investigation," Morning Consult said in a press release following its latest survey.

Roughly three in five independents (59 percent) say it is at least somewhat important for the federal government to continue investigating the January 6 events, down 8 points since June and the share of Republicans who said the same fell by a similar share, to 39 percent, the release said.

"The polling suggests that the investigative microscope on the events of January 6 is becoming just another partisan disagreement," the release added.

Two-thirds of Republican voters say there has been too much focus on the events of January 6, while a similar share of Democrats say there has not been enough focus, according to the release.

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US Navy Base in State of Maryland Lifts Lockdown After Bomb Threat - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Naval Support Activity Bethesda said on Wednesday that the lockdown on the base has been lifted following a bomb threat earlier in the day.

"The installation commanding officer has lifted the shelter in place for all locations effective immediately and has authorized the opening of Gates 1 and 3 for outbound traffic only," the base said via Twitter.

Earlier on Wednesday, the base, which is based in the state of Maryland, ordered everyone on its premises to shelter in place due to a bomb threat.

The base also said there was no indication of an active shooter at the facility.

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US Stocks Mostly Higher on Strong US Earnings, Dow at Record High

NEW YORK, October 20 (Sputnik) - US stocks were mostly higher on Wednesday afternoon, with the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average hitting all-time highs, amid stellar earnings reported by American companies for the third quarter.

Healthcare giant Johnson & Johnson, consumer behemoth Procter & Gamble and streaming service Netflix are among companies that have reported better-than-expected profits for the quarter. On the technology front, Apple rolled out new accessories earlier this week while Google introduced its latest line of phones on Tuesday.

The combination has fueled gains not just on the Dow but also the blue-chip S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks. The tech-laced Nasdaq Composite was, however, down slightly on apparent profit-taking after a strong run earlier in the week.

The Dow was up 180 points, or 0.5%, at 35,637 by 1:15 p.m. ET (17:15 GMT). It hit a record high of 35,670 earlier in the session and is up 5.14% for October.

The S&P 500 index was up 13 points, or 0.3%, at 4,533. The blue-chip indicator rose to as high as 4,541 earlier, coming less than five points away from a record high. The S&P 500 is also up 5.35% for October.

Nasdaq, comprising Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, was down 25 points, or 0.2%. It was up 2.64% on the month.

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US, China Should Mitigate Possible Conflict, Maintain Peace - Nominee for Envoy to Beijing
WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The United States and China should work on improving their communications in order to mitigate the possibility of a conflict and maintain regional peace, President Joe Biden's nominee for the position of US ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns, said during his confirmation hearing on Wednesday.

"First of all, we want to mitigate the danger of an accidental conflict [between China and the US]. We want to maintain the peace, but we also want to have clear messaging and I think multiple channels make sense," Burns told the US Senate hearing.

Burns has also promised to communicate directly with Chinese officials if he is confirmed for the position and facilitate their meetings with US counterparts, including President Joe Biden as well as lawmakers.

A career diplomat, former Under State Secretary for Political Affairs Burns has been nominated by the US President Joe Biden to be US ambassador to China in August. Following the nomination, China expressed hope the new ambassador will play a constructive role in improving of the significantly deteriorated relations between Beijing and Washington.

Burns also served as US ambassador to Greece from 1997-2001 and ambassador to NATO from 2001-2005. During his work as the Under Secretary of State from 2005-2008, he worked with the Chinese government on various issues, including Afghanistan, UN sanctions against Iran and North Korea.

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China Represents Greatest Threat to US, Democratic World - Nominee for Envoy to Beijing

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - China represents the greatest security threat to the United States and the democratic world and unlike Washington, Beijing has no real allies, President Joe Biden's nominee for the position US Ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns, said during his confirmation hearing on Wednesday.

"China is the greatest threat to the security of our country and of the democratic world," Burns told the US Senate hearing. "They have enormous strengths. They have very few friends. They have no real allies."

Burns also called on Congress and Biden administration to scale up security cooperation and arms provisions to Taiwan to defend itself from China.

A career diplomat who served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. Burns was nominated by Biden for the position ambassador to China in August. Following the nomination, China expressed hope that the new ambassador will play a constructive role in improving the significantly deteriorated relationship between Beijing and Washington.

Burns was also the US ambassador to Greece from 1997-2001 and ambassador to NATO from 2001-2005. During his work as the Under Secretary of State from 2005-2008, he worked with the Chinese government on different issues, including Afghanistan, the UN sanctions against Iran and North Korea.

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Canadian Athletes Must be Vaccinated to Compete at 2022 Beijing Games - Olympic Committee

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The Canadian Olympic Committee said in a statement on Wednesday it has notified the country's athletes that they must be "fully vaccinated" against the novel coronavirus in order to compete in the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing.

"On Wednesday, the Canadian Olympic Committee, with the support of its Board of Directors and Athletes' Commission, notified all potential members of Canada's Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games team that they must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 to be named to Team Canada," the statement said.

Canadian Olympic Committee Secretary General David Shoemaker said in the statement that the decision was made for the safety of the athletes and staff and because the federal government recently announced all air travelers must be fully vaccinated by October 30.

Shoemaker noted that the Canadian Olympic Committee brought 840 people to and from the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo without a single case of COVID-19 and wishes to do the same for Beijing in February next year.

On Tuesday, US Olympic Committee Board Chair Susanne Lyon said they do not anticipate a boycott of the event and hope Beijing will replicate the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, during which athletes competed while following strict COVID-19-related safety measures.

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UN Not Involved in Talks on Afghanistan, But Will Be in Touch With All Parties - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 20 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has not been engaged in the Moscow format meeting on Afghanistan, but will be in contact with all the partners concerned, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Wednesday.

"We've not been involved in this latest round of talks, but we'll be in touch with the various partners who've been working to get the talks going and see what information we can get," Haq said during a press briefing. "At this stage, what we're encouraging is to see whether there can be more of an effort by countries, both in the region and more generally throughout, to work to ensure that that the situation in Afghanistan remains peaceful and the basic rights of all Afghans are upheld."

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UN Security Council Representatives to Visit Mali, Niger October 22-26 - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, October 20 (Sputnik) - The members of the UN Security Council will travel to Mali and Niger later at the end of October to meet with the leaders of the two countries, the United Nations spokesperson's office said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The UN Security Council will be embarking on a scheduled trip to Mali and Niger from 22 to 26 October 2021. During the trip, Council members will meet various leaders from the two countries, as well as civil society," the statement said.

The UN Security Council aims to ensure that Mali's transition to civilian rule carries on as planned, the statement said. The representatives will also engage in talks on the issues of terrorism and climate change in the Sahel and examine how the UN Security Council can support the region.

In August 2020, a group of Malian soldiers started a mutiny at the Kati military base near the capital city of Bamako. Insurgents kidnapped several ministers and high-ranking military officials, including former President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita, who later dissolved the government and parliament.

Last September, the parties agreed on a transition period that would last for 18 months and lead to holding parliamentary elections. Bah N'Daw, a former defense minister, was appointed as interim president. However, in late May, Mali saw its second coup as Col. Assimi Goita ousted the new president and prime minister for allegedly violating the transitional charter.

The country's constitutional court has appointed Goita as interim president.

Mali is simultaneously facing an insurgency by various armed groups, especially in the northern areas bordering Burkina Faso and Niger.

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Biden Needs to Negotiate With China Hypersonic Missiles Following Successful Test - McCaul

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration needs to begin engaging Beijing in talks to limit the threat of hypersonic weapons, especially following China's recent test of a hypersonic weapon launched from space, lead Republican on the US House Foreign Affairs Committee Michael McCaul said on Wednesday.

"Unlike Russia we have no treaties with China when it comes to hypersonics and even nuclear technology," McCaul told reporters. "It's extremely important that this administration engage in discussions now with the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] on these hypersonic missiles that are so dangerous to our national security and the world.

McCaul cited a report by House Republicans a year ago warning of China's edge over the United States in developing weapons that are difficult to detect because they fly at multiple times the speed of sound - a warning that he said was illustrated by China's test of a hypersonic weapon in August.

The weapon orbited the Earth and then launched a missile that came within 20 miles of the intended target.

"It's disturbing. It's a wakeup call. It's a Sputnik moment," McCaul said of the test. He was referring to the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of the Sputnik satellite, which triggered a space race between Moscow and Washington.

The United States needs to catch up with China in a new space race, he added.

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Instagram Users Report Issues With Social Media Platform - Outage Tracker

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Instagram users for the last three hours have reported they are experiencing issues with the social media platform, the online outage tracker Downtetector revealed on Wednesday.

The issues include trouble uploading content and making posts.

The issue appears to only be affecting users in the United States, according to Downtetector. Earlier this month, Facebook services, including Instagram, was hit by a massive outage that affected users in the United States, Canada, Russia and in numerous European countries.

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US Crude Stockpiles Down First Time in 4 Weeks as Demand Outpaces Production - EIA

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - US crude stockpiles have fallen for the first time in four weeks as demand for gasoline and diesel outpaces production, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) revealed on Wednesday.

Crude stockpiles fell by 431,000 barrels during the week to October 15, after three previous weeks of builds totaling nearly 13, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report showed.

Analysts polled by US media had anticipated an increase of 2 million barrels for the just-ended week.

"Refined product demand remains robust, especially for gasoline, which is exceedingly strong," John Kilduff, founding partner at energy hedge fund Again Capital, said.

Higher economic activity amid a sheer drop in global caseloads of coronavirus infections have helped fuel consumption to spike in recent weeks as more motorists hit the road and governments loosened up activity curtailed for months by the coronavirus pandemic.

The higher demand for fuels showed up in the weekly inventory data set released by the EIA on Thursday.

Gasoline stockpiles fell by 5.4 million barrels last week versus forecasts for a drop of 950,000 while inventories of distillates slipped by 3.9 million barrels against expectations for a 1.2 million-barrel decline.

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Google Says Disrupted Phishing Campaign by 'Russian-Speaking' Hackers Targeting YouTubers

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Google said on Wednesday that over the past two years it has disrupted several phishing campaign by Russian-speaking hackers who targeted YouTubers with cookie theft malware.

"Since late 2019, our team has disrupted financially motivated phishing campaigns targeting YouTubers with Cookie Theft malware," Google said in a statement. "The actors behind this campaign, which we attribute to a group of hackers recruited in a Russian-speaking forum, lure their target with fake collaboration opportunities (typically a demo for anti-virus software, VPN, music players, photo editing or online games), hijack their channel, then either sell it to the highest bidder or use it to broadcast cryptocurrency scams."

Google said in the statement that it has decreased the volume of related phishing emails on Gmail by 99.6 percent since May, having blocked some 1.6 million messages to their intended targets.

Some 15,000 Gmail accounts were identified that were used by hackers as part of this phishing campaign, the company said.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has been notified about the cyber activity and will investigate the matter, Google added.

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Shooter Nikolas Cruz Pleads Guilty to Killing 17 People in 2018 Florida School Massacre

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Parkland, Florida school shooter Nikolas Cruz on Wednesday pleaded guilty in court to all counts of murder and attempted murder and will now face sentencing with the possibility of receiving the death penalty.

Cruz killed 14 students and three staff members at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland on February 14, 2018.

After the judge in the case accepted the guilty plea, Cruz read a statement in which he apologized and made a case against drug use and racism.

"I am very sorry for what I did, and I have to live with it every day, and that if I were to get a second chance, I would do everything in my power to try and help others," Cruz said. "I hate drugs, and I believe this country would do better if everyone would stop smoking marijuana and doing all these drugs and causing racism and violence out in the streets."

Cruz admitted to his frequent use of marijuana while media reported about his involvement in a racist and anti-Semitic online group chat and demonstrated an interest in violence.

Following the guilty plea, a jury will now decide whether Cruz deserves the death penalty. He faces a minimum sentence of life in prison, which the court noted does not come with the possibility of parole in Florida.

The judge and legal teams agreed to convene again on October 26 for a status conference, during which they will discuss court motions, exchange evidence and engage in other communication related to the trial.

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Pfizer Wins Control of Global Vaccine Access in Government Contracts - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Vaccine maker Pfizer, in contracts with governments, routinely wins a veto power over donations of the company's inoculations to poor countries, silence from government officials over any disputes that arise and multiple protections from lawsuits, the advocacy group Public Citizen said in a report on Wednesday.

"Public Citizen has identified several Pfizer contracts, including with Brazil, Colombia, the European Commission and the US, that offer a glimpse into how the world's second largest pharmaceutical corporation has gained the power to throttle supply, shift risk and maximize profits all during the worst public health crisis in a century," the report said.

The report is based on copies of confidential contracts with eight nations, including redacted versions for the United States and the United Kingdom, and unredacted copies of agreements with the European Commission.

However, the report focuses largely on contracts with four Latin American nations - Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic and Brazil.

Brazil, for example, is restricted from accepting vaccine donations from other countries and is required to purchase all vaccines directly from Pfizer, the report said.

In addition, Brazil is prohibited from donating vaccines to other nations without Pfizer's permission. The report gives no indication that Pfizer ever exercised that option.

Multiple press reports on Pfizer's bare-knuckle approach in negotiations followed a February article by the UK-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism with similar allegations of bullying. Pfizer declined to comment on claims in the Bureau of Investigative Journalism article, but issued a statement saying the company was committed to working with governments and relevant agencies to ensure equitable and affordable global access to its vaccine.

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US Rule Seeks to Stem Sales of Hacking Tools to Russia, China - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The Commerce Department on Wednesday announced a long awaited regulation that US officials hope will stem the sales of hacking software to China, Russia and other so-called nations of concern without a license from the Department's Bureau of Industry and Security.

"The rule, which will take effect in 90 days, would cover software such as Pegasus, a potent spyware product sold by the Israeli firm NSO Group to governments that have used it to spy on dissidents and journalists," the Commerce Department said in a press release.

The rule will take effect following a 90-day period of public comments. It would bar sales of hacking software and equipment to China and Russia, as well as to a number of other countries, without a license.

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo characterized the rule as being "an appropriately tailored approach that protects America's national security against malicious cyber actors while ensuring legitimate cybersecurity activities."

The rule would allow US researchers to work with colleagues in other nations to uncover software vulnerabilities. The rule is also designed to protect the ability of cybersecurity firms to respond to hacking incidents, according to media reports.

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IMF Says Ukraine Responding 'Very Well' to COVID-19 Crisis

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has responded very well to the economic crisis from the COVID-19 pandemic, International Monetary Fund (IMF) European Department Director Alfred Kammer told reporters on Wednesday.

"Ukraine has been responding to the COVID-19 crisis very well," Kammer said during a virtual press briefing.

The measures the Ukrainian government undertook include fiscal support for the economy and a very accommodated monetary policy, Kammer said.

The authorities were "absolutely right" to undertake steps on tightening monetary policy, Kammer also said. Such measures are essential for keeping inflation within acceptable standards, he added.

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US Navy Base in Bethesda Placed on Lockdown Over Bomb Threat - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - Naval Support Activity Bethesda, a US Navy military base in the state of Maryland, said in a statement on Wednesday that it has issued an order to shelter in place over a bomb threat.

"At approximately 8:45 a.m., the installation received a phone call from an anonymous source stating there is a bomb at or near Building 10. Security personnel have responded to the scene," Naval Support Activity Bethesda said via Twitter. "The base is on lockdown. All personnel should shelter in place. All gates are closed to non-emergency traffic. The public is asked to avoid the area."

The base said in a follow-up statement on Wednesday that there is no indication of an active shooter at the facility, but the bomb threat was still under investigation and the lockdown order remains in place.

The official "all clear" signal will be given when appropriate through social media and other official channels, the base added.

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Russia Shows Strong Recovery in 2021 Due to Right Policies Amid COVID-19 Crisis - IMF

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The right set of policies undertaken by Russia during the COVID-19 crisis allowed the country to show a strong economic recovery in 2021, International Monetary Fund (IMF) European Department Director Alfred Kammer told reporters on Wednesday.

"Russia has a right set of policies in place during the crisis, supporting this recovery," Kammer said during a virtual press briefing.

Kammer explained that Russia's fiscal and monetary policies were "supportive" and led to a strong recovery currently taking place.

In 2020, Russia faced a "very shallow" recession, and has rebounded very strongly in 2021, Kammer said.

Speaking about the medium term, Kammer highlighted the importance of focusing on structural reforms of the economy to allow an increase in productivity and growth.

"This is the biggest Achilles heel of the Russian economy going forward," he said.

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US Ready to Inoculate 28M In Kids Ages 5-11 When FDA Authorizes COVID Shots- White House

WASHINGTON, October 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is getting ready to kick off a massive vaccination program of about 28 million children in the United States aged 5-11 once the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorizes Pfizer's vaccine against the novel coronavirus that is currently being tested for this age group, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said.

"If authorized, Pfizer's vaccine for kids ages five through 11 will make an additional 28 million Americans eligible for vaccination," Zients said at a press briefing on Wednesday.

Zients noted that to achieve this ambitious goal, the Biden administration has enrolled more than 25,000 pediatricians, family doctors and other primary care providers as well as worked with Pfizer to modify the packaging of the pediatric doses to make it easier to provide the vaccines to children.

The United States is set to hit 190 million fully vaccinated residents against the novel coronavirus later in the day, Zients added.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Biden administration outlined a plan to boost vaccinations among children aged 5-11 after the FDA approval. The plan includes a set of measures to provide for convenient and accessible vaccination for children, including securing enough vaccines and creating thousands of vaccination sites across the country.